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Little (White) Women: Locating Whiteness in (De)constructions of the American Female from Alcott to Split Britches

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In her introduction to the Modern Library's 1983 edition of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Madelon Bedell argues that the novel has 'a quality of universality,' and proposes that it may be '*the* American female myth,' (xi, italics hers). In the twentieth century, Alcott's novel became a popular subject for feminist critical analysis of the construction of gender roles in American literature (Eiselein 68-72). These analyses often overlook the inextricable ties between gender construction, class, and racialization.¹ This paper will begin with a brief analysis of how Alcott's canonical work constructs the American female as moral, heterosexual *and* of 'white' European descent. I will then move my focus to a creative deconstruction of *Little Women* located in the lesbian/feminist performance group Split Britches' play *Little Women, The Tragedy (LWTT)*. I will illustrate that although the 1988 production of *LWTT* calls into question the norms of morality and womanhood set forth by the popular novel, the play omits race as a category of identification and intersecting mode of oppression for women. Notably, the ability of this theatre piece to expose oppressive systems of identity construction, I argue, relies on the whiteness of the actors' bodies.

My concern with the assumed signification of universal womanhood as white in such canonical works as *Little Women* originates from the recognition that women are affected by many intersecting modes of oppression, which are created by and create constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation (Brown 93; Joseph 2).

¹ By racialisation I mean: the process by which an individual or group of individuals self-identify or are identified according to phenotype or other perceived shared attributes.

Unfortunately, feminists have often failed to examine their own racialized identification, particularly when participating in the naturalized dominant group. Too often, feminist discourse does not negotiate social inequities between groups of women, as if gender relations exist independently of racial relations. In 1987, feminist social activist and Ethnic Studies Professor bell hooks pointed out that many people think of feminism ‘as a movement that aims to make women the social equals of men[....][But] men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure’ (62-3). hooks continues to ask her fellow feminists to remember social, economic and cultural differences experienced by women of colour as they fight for all women’s rights. This paper seeks to examine how both the classic and the post-modern lesbian version of *Little Women* are indeed ‘raced,’ and to illuminate some of the ways whiteness shapes these two works.

Alcott’s *Little Women* seeks to be radical (for its time), although it is the ‘radicalism of philanthropy,’ which depends on the hardship of others to be articulated (Stimpson 72). Throughout the book, an intellectual, middle-class whiteness is signified by the March daughters’ concerns: Meg is plagued by her lack of fashionable clothes; Amy whines over her unfortunate relationships with her teacher and the girls at school; Jo is obsessed with publishing her stories; and Beth’s one desire is to have a grand piano. Alcott depicts Marmee as saintly for continually assisting the more severely impoverished Hummel family. In spite of minor hardships, the March family is privileged, cultured, educated, and well loved, particularly when compared to the lives of their female African American contemporaries who struggled daily for survival against the horrors of slavery.

Although the term ‘race’ and the issue of slavery are seemingly left out of the novel, *Little Women* ‘provides an exemplary model for the wartime nation, its metaphoric frame now shifted from the locus of the body to that of the household’ (Young 101). Marmee instructs her girls to be soldiers of morality, efficiently training her daughters to become skilled mistresses of the domestic sphere. Despite even Jo’s resistance, by the end of the novel all of the March girls have entered the ‘domestic cult of true womanhood, which is always already white womanhood,’ because of its dependency on its members’ positions as mothers and wives to white males (Brown qtd. Davy 196). The novel illustrates the impact of the Civil War on the white middle-class American female without one direct reference to an African-American or enslaved African presence. The absence of an ‘Africanist’² presence in *Little Women*, when the story takes place during a time of extreme national and racial tension over the issue of black slavery, invents a construct of ‘Americanness’ which is synonymous with whiteness (Morrison 47).

The March women are heroines of great morality because they are trained in the ‘sweetness of self-denial,’ make personal sacrifices to help the poor and the sick, and show unwavering commitment to their Unionist soldiers (Alcott 113). Alcott even hints that her little women are sympathetic to the abolitionist cause when Jo refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for a lesson in morality. She says to her sisters, ‘...just say to us, as old Chloe did in *Uncle Tom*, “Tink ob yer marcies, chillin! tink ob yer marcies!”’(Alcott 66). The novel illustrates an idyllic representation of Northern white female character and virtue. However, the privileged

² Toni Morrison creates the term ‘Africanist’ in *Playing in the Dark*, to mean the ‘four-hundred-year-old presence of, first Africans, then African Americans in the United States’ (5).

position Alcott's characters occupy, as educated, moral, abolitionist American women, depends on the poverty and racial oppression of others.

The novel's fixation on morality plays a central role in its construction of gendered American whiteness. This bourgeois obsession with morality, and specifically, with protecting female virtue, becomes evident as Alcott's little women fight their 'bosom enemies': Meg's vanity, Jo's anger, Amy's selfishness, and Beth's shyness (11). While this morality seems racially unmarked, the novel describes a type of womanhood that was only accessible to middle-class white women; the most important facet of female virtue in 'the cult of true womanhood' in nineteenth century America was the woman's role as mother and wife (Davis 5). 'Woman' became synonymous with 'mother' and 'housewife,' but among black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found (Davis 12). The famous speech known as 'Ain't I a Woman?' given by feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 offers a stark comparison between the concerns and lifestyle of the mythologized March family and those of African American women during the Civil War. While Marmee teaches her daughters reverence for marriage, motherhood and domestic work, Truth points out the privilege implicit in such lessons. Truth says, 'I have borned thirteen chilern and see 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out in a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard – and ain't I a woman?' (134). Truth's words illustrate that the domestic sphere in itself is a privileged one which offers the luxury of privacy and a sanctioned space for rest and leisure. It is a protected zone, away from the harsh and unfeminine realities of manual labour and work outside of one's own home. The morality Alcott constructs is specific to white American middle-class women, and therefore the

identities constructed should be interrogated along the converging axes of gender, class, and *race*.³

In order to contextualize the gap between analysis of gender construction and the critical studies of race, I turn my attention to a theatrical deconstruction of Alcott's 'timeless' women's novel. Feminist/lesbian performance company Split Britches wrote, produced, directed, and performed *Little Women, The Tragedy* at WOW (Women's One World Café), in 1988.⁴ This fascinating play explores Alcott's life in relation to the story of *Little Women* as actor Lois Weaver switches between the characters Jo March and Louisa May Alcott. *LWTT* deconstructs Alcott's static binary of middle-class morality versus 'immoral' displays of desire and sexuality. At the same time, it incorporates the theme of censorship, shedding light on the funding cuts of the United States' National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and the feminist anti-pornography debates prevalent at that time.

While I make no claims about the authorial intentions of either work, I argue that, just as *Little Women* speaks to and for white American women, *LWTT* speaks to and for white feminists and lesbians. Despite the work's efforts to dethrone the process of identity construction, the play ignores the characters' (and performers') positions as racialized (white) bodies. This omission is significant because the production thoroughly interrogates the stifling constructions of middle-class, hetero-normative feminine morality, which have always been linked to whiteness, without directly addressing that linkage. I argue that this omission is a reflection of the time and social climate in which

³ It should be apparent that 'race' here includes 'whiteness,' and that both of these words imply systems of identity construction.

⁴ I will be citing quotations directly from the play-text as published in, *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, Ed. Sue-Ellen Case, (119-148) and referencing a video recording of a performance.

the piece was produced, and that it illustrates how gender performativity may register differently for women of colour and white women.

Many feminist scholars and activists recall that the 1980s were a painful time, full of emotionally and politically charged debate. This pain can be linked to the jaggedness of the multiple schisms in the feminist movement. As Sue-Ellen Case relates in her introduction to *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, at the time this play was produced there was a ‘rift in feminist circles around the anti-pornography debates’ (25). This division was exemplified and perhaps exasperated by a painful confrontation at the Barnard Conference of 1982 ‘between s/m lesbians who were pro-sex, erotics, even pornography and the feminists who were anti-porn’ (Case 25). At the same time, women of colour challenged the feminist tendency to present the white middle class perspective as *the* definitive experience of all women. Radical feminists began to dismiss the liberal feminist notion of ‘social equality’ since it seemed to ignore race, class and sexuality as intersecting factors which determine oppression. Feminists of colour asked their white counterparts to take responsibility for recognizing and organizing against racism (Cuomo 5; hooks 62-3).

Answering this call, many white feminists made efforts to evaluate their own racial position, and to extend feminism as a form of combating all modes of oppression. There were still many white and lesbian feminists, however, who felt that sexism and homophobia needed to remain in the forefront of feminist practice (Russo 304). This rising division was complicated further by the aggressively hetero-normative communities of colour nationalist movements, which alienated both white feminists and lesbians (Combahee 368).

Split Britches formed during this tumultuous period, and developed as ‘an all-white, but increasingly lesbian-focused theatre practice’ (Case 5). Split Britches’ *LWTT* spins a tale about ‘morality’ that cannot be separated from the political and social factors of this divisive time in the feminist movement. In her first speech, Weaver plays a character that is a hybrid of the actor Lois Weaver as herself and Louisa May Alcott. She highlights the themes of pornography and morality within the play, ‘...then we got interested in censorship, and pornography, and morality as it was represented by set design during the Italian Renaissance...’ (120).⁵ Immediately, the performers warn the audience that the play will highlight the political anti-pornography debates; however, the audience is not likely to see the other major feminist debate (between women of colour and white feminists) represented within this speech nor within the rest of the play as it unfolds.

In her article, ‘Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project,’ Kate Davy examines the lack of African American women within the collective at WOW, the performance venue founded by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, where *LWTT* was originally produced. This article illuminates historical and ideological factors that contributed to the absence of women of colour at WOW specifically, and within feminist and lesbian performance more generally. Davy notes that the performances at WOW are largely concerned with ‘intervening in the normative, naturalizing, and mystifying representational codes that produce “woman” as an ideological construct and heterosexuality as a psychological, social, and cultural imperative’ (191). *LWTT* fits this description, dismantling the constructed nature of ‘woman,’ but omitting the element of

⁵ Split Britches’ acting style does not rely heavily on the convention of the “fourth wall”. Often the actors will slip in and out of characters and address the audience as themselves.

racialisation as a converging factor in gender construction. I argue that *LWTT*'s ability to subvert normalizing constructions of gender, however, depends on the actors' whiteness. This point indicates that the strategies of resistance available for white women may have been different from those available to women of colour.

The possibility of representing and deconstructing what Davy identifies as 'the good-girl syndrome,' is not as readily available to women of colour as it is to white women (193). Deb Margolin's portrayal of Khurve, a burlesque dancer, Peggy Shaw's butch version of an evangelist Christian preacher, Hilarious, and Lois Weaver's representation of Louisa May Alcott as a sexual – possibly homosexual – woman, contrast with Victorian (and post-Victorian) notions of proper feminine propriety and morality. These counter-hegemonic representations of 'woman' challenge the norm of the heterosexual middle-class good-girl. In order to upset the good-girl syndrome, the actors' bodies must first contain the possibility of assuming the hegemonic roles the performance aims to deconstruct. To paraphrase Davy, it is by virtue of *Split Britches*' position of privilege as an all white performance group that this site of resistance is readable (193).

Conversely, women of colour, and specifically African American women, have been constructed historically as lascivious, with 'immoderate and overabundant sexuality' (Hartman 86). While white women in the early nineteenth century suffered under the weight of maintaining middle-class propriety and morality, black women were seen as temptresses of their white masters, whose economic power legitimized unlimited access to enslaved African women's bodies (Davis 175). Stereotyped as sexually voracious and promiscuous, black women were regarded as immoral, in opposition to the idealized pristine character of white women. The narrative of the immoral, over-sexed

black woman still exists today, continually reinforced by the commercial rap industry. One only needs to watch 'MTV Jams,' or any number of music videos featuring young black female dancers to see the contemporary cultural appropriations of such a myth (Rose 169). Performing sexuality excessively, thus subverting restrictive codes of feminine morality, would not register as a constructive strategy for black women who have already been culturally marked as immoral and sexually excessive. *LWTT* tears down the 'ideology of true womanhood,' an ideology always already denied to black women.

Split Britches' version of the ultimate 'female myth' incorporates the theatrical genre of morality plays as the backdrop for subverting the production of white female subjectivity. By repositioning sexuality as a source of empowerment for women, Split Britches indicate that 'morality' and 'righteousness' do not necessarily equate to goodness, and sexuality and desire are not innately immoral. Performing the rejection of traditional feminine mores reads as an effective strategy because the actors are white; however, this strategy of resistance, in part, relies on the invisibility of their whiteness. The audience may not 'notice' the performers' race nor the many markers of white culture within the play itself, but this 'not seeing' whiteness or not seeing white as 'race' illustrates white cultural dominance, as it is taken for granted, naturalized and 'unmarked' (Frankenburg 5).

Although race is not directly addressed at any point within *LWTT*, several aspects of it speak exclusively to and about white feminists and lesbians. I will touch on these aspects in an attempt to make the whiteness performed in this work visible through analysis, and to explore the relationship between white identity and feminist discourse

within this production. First of all, the play illustrates that heterosexuality and sexual piety are assumed in the Victorian narrative of morality, a narrative assigned to middle-class white women. Secondly, the display of alternative and excessive sexualities as a mode of deconstructing gender roles and 'morality' is a strategy that relies on the whiteness of the performers and characters. And finally, the specific qualities of the play's material elements – such as characters/actors, design, plot, and music – telegraph whiteness through the use of American and European cultural markers.

The set design of the 1988 production references traditional European morality plays in which the concepts of Heaven and Hell are dramatized, debated, and staged. Case describes the set design for *LWTT*: 'Heaven and Hell are the[...]limits of the stage, situating all action specifically on the spectrum between' (26). In the tradition of the morality play, there is a manifestation of an angel (Shaw's zealous preacher, Hilarious) and a devil (Margolin's 'strumpet' Khurve). However, these seemingly concrete personifications of good versus evil are complicated by contradictions within the characters and how each relates to the notion of morality, which itself is slippery. The tragedy of the play is located in Louisa's extreme sadness, and she is dynamically portrayed as being torn between her reputation as a moral Victorian American women's writer, and her desire to break with that construction and, as the character states, write 'in a voice more intimate, more seductive, more passionate...more culturally marginal...' (127). As the plot unfolds, the opposing sides of Louisa's identity, (Devil/strumpet/Khurve/Desirous and Angel/Preacher/Hilarious/Moral) challenge each other, revealing the interaction between the elements of desire and morality. This process subsequently disentangles the notion of consensus from that of censorship, as it asserts

the constructed nature of such binaries as morality/desire, pornography/decenty, masculine/feminine, sexual/righteous (Case 25).

Peggy Shaw, well known at WOW Café as a butch lesbian actor, appears to be playing Hilarious as a male preacher. When Louisa imagines a possible dialogue between her right hand (Hilarious) and her left hand (Khurve), she refers to Hilarious as ‘she’ (127-29). Hilarious is endowed with ‘masculine’ qualities, but as Louisa’s speech indicates, Hilarious’s primary function is to personify Louisa’s right hand of morality. This creates an interesting slippage: Shaw could be playing Hilarious as a male, or possibly, she may be playing Hilarious as a butch lesbian, subverting the traditional mores of Christianity from the outset. Read as an extension of the female author, Hilarious is the side of Louisa so obsessed with adhering to the codes of morality within the hegemony of white, Christian, American, heterosexual males, that ‘she’ is constructed as ‘he.’

During a long, passionate evangelical speech, Hilarious’ words smack of this patriarchal brand of morality. ‘Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! I am talking about the Truth!’ ‘he’ says. A few lines later he seems to comment on the nature of that ‘Truth’ with, ‘Please stand back, I spit when I talk!’(129). Shaw’s character is the quintessential ‘moral’ hypocrite. He judges those who ‘go in and see the black crook dance and the hips that jiggle with nothing to wear,’ but is seduced by Khurve’s burlesque dancing (130). He swaggers into the audience and in a Film Noir-meets-carnival-master-of-ceremonies style, says:

Hello, sweetheart, don’t be afraid. Aren’t you a little darling? It’s nice to see you tonight! *(She crosses back to center stage, speaking loudly)* Step right up, step right up! Let us be in Heaven together! ...Hilarious B. Hooves, that’s my name! Hilarious, my given name, named after my first mother. Of course, we all have

only one mother, the mother of God! (*She pulls a small statue of the Virgin Mary from her pocket and displays it*), (129).

Shaw's vocal delivery, gestures, and appearance, as well as the character's name, language, and praising of Mother Mary imply whiteness. Hilarious is obsessed with maintaining morality and decency through self-denial in a way that seems puritanical, evoking the southern white American evangelist tradition. Shaw's short blonde hair, cream suit, light skin, and charisma evoke the infamous white televangelists of the 1970s and 1980s, known for their aggressively conservative social politics, ability to procure funds from their 'flock,' and their reputation for involvement with multiple (homo)sexual and extortion scandals.⁶

Because *LWTT* is not a realistic play, and *Split Britches* certainly do not draw upon psychological realism as an acting style, the butch lesbian persona of Peggy Shaw is always present in her depiction of Hilarious. Hilarious exalts himself as righteous by describing his suppression of sexual desire, '...it's easier to see the will of God than to act on it! The woman in the church with the silk scarf! I let her go! After one song I knew every shadow of the blue of her eye, and I let her go!' (137). In this way, Hilarious, who is constantly struggling to repress his/her own sexual desires, represents how Christian bourgeois morality forbids sexuality, and specifically, homosexuality. Whether Hilarious is male or butch lesbian, the character desires a blue-eyed churchwoman wearing a 'silk scarf.' In order to maintain Christian ideals of morality, which have been historically assigned to white Americans, Hilarious cannot have his blue-eyed fantasy.

Recognizing that his Heaven is not what he had imagined, Hilarious breaks with his 'morality' once again, in rage: 'I believed all the things I said to people! I believed I

⁶ Jim and Tammy Bakker and Billy James Hargis are examples of evangelist American preachers, whose hypocritical actions were revealed in 1970s and 1980s. Both stories erupted into public scandal.

would go to Heaven and that the heavenly kingdom was the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Jesus Christ his one and only son! I believed that! [...] And I was a liar!’ (136). Hilarious’s brand of fire-and-brimstone morality deteriorates by the play’s end into something like a bitter-sweet peace, a queer satisfaction that comes with finally letting go of the constricting ideals that have always contained painful, suppressed doubt.

Khurve also reverses the Victorian brand of morality that was assigned to the white middle-class. She represents the gazed upon body; she is the burlesque dancer, who fluctuates between loving her lifestyle and hating herself because she understands that others regard her as immoral. Khurve represents pornography and nakedness, both literally and metaphorically. She is honest, forthright, and unapologetic in her aggressive display of sexuality, saying ‘I got nothin’ to apologize for. I never made no deals. I did what I did and I never asked nothin’ and I never tried to hide from anyone anything,’ (137). This is in complete opposition to Hilarious’s hypocrisy, regret, and self-hatred. In effect, her virtue appears more intact than his; and so the Victorian bourgeois boundaries of morality and immorality crumble.

Khurve is the most embodied character in the play by virtue of her profession, costume, language, and bold display of sexuality. Her costume is a red, tight, skimpy teddy. She makes her living in a branch of performance that caters to the white bourgeois elite. Burlesque cannot be separated from its European origin, marking the audience members as middle-class men, and the dancers as ‘fallen-women.’ Davy writes:

White women signify hegemonic, institutionalized whiteness by virtue of their association with a pure, chaste, asexual before-the-fall-womanhood [...] attained and maintained via middle-class respectability, with its implicit heterosexuality. At the same time, white women signify an uncontrolled after-the-fall-sexuality, or fallen woman status, embodied by some white women (prostitutes, white trash, lesbians) and all women of color. (197)

Khurve most obviously subverts the moral hierarchies that construct 'woman' as moral and sexually pure. Khurve, in fact, has more integrity than Hilarious, and at least as much clout; they both, after all, end up somewhere between Heaven and Hell. Khurve is able to use her sexuality as a form of empowerment, which is evidenced by her soul escaping damnation despite her rebellious, embodied profession, in part because she is phenotypically 'white.' Had Khurve been played by an African American woman, the character may have run the risk of reinforcing the problematic historical construction of black women as sexually promiscuous. Margolin as Khurve conveys a transgressive female identity in part due to the juxtaposition her bold sexuality poses to the Victorian ideal of white female virtue.

Khurve's necessary whiteness is made apparent when she performs the burlesque song and dance number 'Adam and Eve:'

I'm sure you've heard the story of Adam and Eve
When Adam was tempted by an apple, I believe,
But between me and you, that rumor is viscous
Adam was tempted all right, but not by a golden delicious
It was a pair, a peachy pair, (*she cups her breasts indicating which 'pair'*)
Made Adam aware he was there...

This particular burlesque number comments on the female as temptress and the female body as the cause for original sin. She is more embodied than sexually pious Hilarious or repressed Louisa, but somehow appears empowered by this embodiment. Khurve smiles, dances, and appears to be in control of her performance, her profession, and she ardently defends her choice to 'make love movies,' and show her 'body to people who wanted to see it!' (137-8). In this song, Khurve depicts biblical Eve as possessing power over Adam and, indeed, mankind. Eve, then, is characterized as powerful through her sexuality (which white middle-class mores deem 'immoral').

This can be compared with another point made by Sojourner Truth, who fought to include women of colour within the first wave of the American feminist movement: ‘Den dat little man in black over dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as man, ‘cause Christ want a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? ...Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with Him’ (135). Truth, like Khurve, positions women as powerful through a Christian narrative. However, these are two very different representations: Khurve subverts ‘white morality,’ while Truth’s specific social positionality requires her to maintain it. Truth connects women’s empowerment to their role as mothers, appealing to white feminists in 1851 by advocating the extreme morality and propriety that marked the early women’s movement. She countered the image of black women as sexually voracious by asserting that a woman’s power is obtained through the central role she plays in maintaining morality in the family and in the community. Much of the modern women of colour branch of feminism, for which she has become an icon, is also invested in this notion: unfortunately, impressions of African American women as overtly sexual and innately immoral linger, and much contemporary counter-hegemonic performance by African American women must therefore first address these stereotypes. Khurve approaches female power from the opposite direction, promoting Eve’s sexuality as powerful. The possibility for Khurve to show ‘woman’ as empowered through sexuality relies on her ability to register first as a ‘good girl,’ which is readable because of her whiteness.

At the start of the play Khurve and Hilarious seem to assume opposite ends of the spectrum of morality due to their professions and costumes: Hilarious is presented as highly moral and Khurve, highly immoral. As the play develops, these two extremes

seem to bend further towards each other, converging, centre stage, on Weaver's Jo/Louisa. Jo/Louisa is both Khurve and Hilarious; she is both 'moral' and 'corrupt' at once, which calls the binary between the moral and corrupt into question. The implicit message dramatized through the actions of this three-in-one character is that sexuality, morality, desire, gender, and class are socially constructed.

As this lesbian/feminist rendition of the classic (white) girls' novel effectively deconstructs gender and class, it also represents whiteness. Whiteness is inherent in the play's reference to Italian Renaissance architecture, Burlesque, and morality plays, which evoke their European place of origin. Whiteness is obvious in the characterizations (a Burlesque dancer, an evangelist Christian preacher, a nineteenth century bourgeois female writer), and implicit in the subject matter (anti-porn and pro-sex debates). The morality deconstructed is that assigned to the white middle-class of Alcott's time, and the white anti-pornography feminists of the 1980s. And finally, *LWTT* successfully deconstructs the cult of 'true womanhood' through a process that implicitly relies on the performers' whiteness.

LWTT reveals tension between feminists over the role of sexuality in feminist politics and its relationship with morality in the 1980s. Alcott developed an idealized 'American' female character of exemplary moral conduct and domestic skill during the Civil War. Both of these works therefore reflect the time periods in which they were written and performed respectively, and also function as 'timely' feminist interventions which highlight specific concerns over dominant norms of femininity and womanhood. This may explain why Alcott's 'little women,' whose 'womanly goodness' relied heavily on maintaining Victorian values of heterosexual marriage and motherhood within the

privileged site of the home, were not the black or the poor on whom their 'radicalism of philanthropy' relied (Stimpson 72). It also explains why *LWTT*'s Khurve, who subverts the notion that sexually promiscuous behaviour is immoral, and Hilarious, who illustrates the hypocrisy often connected with external displays of righteousness, are not the women of colour demanding to be recognized and included within the feminist movement.

The ability to subvert 'feminine' mores through bold and/or alternative displays of sexuality highlights the different historical experiences of women of colour and white women, reminding us to carefully consider the myriad nuances of privilege and oppression that make up women's experience. This paper has attempted to make visible the white identity present in these important women's works, which have often been examined only in terms of how each treats the idea of 'woman.' We must explore the presence and position of white identity in works that might unquestioningly or accidentally naturalize *the* women's experience as white and, in effect, reinforce the absence or erasure of racial and social inequities critically identified within feminist circles and discourse.

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